



# Exploring Consent and Power in Preschool



by Mike Huber

*Three-year-olds Juanita and Hektor are often frustrated when they try to join the play of their classmates. When Juanita wants to play with other children, she often grabs toys from their hands. Meanwhile, Hektor is not always aware of non-verbal cues from others. Once he put a toy otoscope on Tou's ear. When Tou told Hektor to stop, Hektor simply said, "But you're sick." Tou moved away, but Hektor followed him, pushing the otoscope onto his ear until a teacher had to intervene.*

*Their teacher, Sonia, worried about Juanita and Hektor. From her perspective, Juanita and Hektor were impulsive, at best, and aggressive. Sonia tried several strategies, but*

*nothing seemed to work. One day, several weeks into the school year, Sonia noticed a change.*

*Hektor pointed his finger at Juanita. "Bang!" Before Sonia could intervene, Juanita smiled and pointed her finger at Hektor. Soon they were chasing each other around the room, pretending to shoot each other for the next 30 minutes. They never bumped into anyone else. They smiled at each other throughout the game.*

*It seems like Juanita and Hektor solved the problem without their teacher's help, but the fact that Sonia did not intervene was as important as the interaction between the two children. Sonia recognized that both children were successfully interacting, something that was all too rare for them.*

The art of teaching requires observation and reflection, as much as it requires action. Sometimes the most effective thing to do as a teacher is to watch. What we see will inform future interactions with children, but first children need direct experience.

The fact that Juanita and Hektor found success by pretending to shoot each

other is not surprising. This is a common form of play for many preschoolers, and one where the rules are simple. Children who have a hard time joining social play often find success in this type of play. Unfortunately, teachers often stop this type of play with the idea that the theme of the game is anti-social. As the story above illustrates, pretend gunplay can in fact allow children to be socially successful. I would suggest that a teacher forbidding gunplay can potentially be fostering anti-social behavior.

Consent has become a topic of interest in our culture in the past year. There is recognition that interactions in the workplace should follow basic rules of consent. While this idea comes far too late for many of us, it does bring up some questions in our practice as teachers of young children. As teachers, we need to figure out how to create a culture of consent in our classrooms.

Creating a culture of consent starts with teachers respecting the intentions of children. A child who leaves a line to look closely at an ant is not purposely disobeying the teacher. Rather, their curiosity has made them forget what



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the teacher had asked about staying in line. The intention of the child is to get a closer look at the ant. The teacher has a choice. They can simply tell the child that they must stay in line and ignore the child's desire. They can stop the line and ask what the child found. Other children may then also join to get a look at the ant. The teacher can even say that they wish they had time to stop and look at the ant, but right now the class had to keep moving. The third choice shows interest in the child even if they cannot take the time to look.

It is important to realize that whatever the teacher does, it is a choice the teacher makes. And the choice sends a message about what the teacher considers important and how the teacher views the voice of the children.

Teachers also have a choice of how they view play. Play involves personal choice. Children choose what to play based on an internal sense of what they are interested in or what they want to explore. It is a very personal choice, so teachers should take great pains to allow for children to follow their interests while guiding all children to respect the wishes of others.

In the case of Juanita and Hektor, they chose to pretend to shoot each other. They clearly had a strong interest in the play, continuing the game for 30 minutes. Teachers usually allow children to express themselves when pretending, but that is not always the case with gunplay. As always, teachers make a choice when confronted with any type of play. Let's examine the message a teacher sends with the choices they make regarding gunplay.

The ways teachers respond to gunplay fall into three categories: banning it, allowing but not engaging with the children, and allowing it while having some interaction with the children. Each approach sends a distinct message about

how the teacher views the ideas of children, and ultimately, about consent.

If a teacher simply bans the play because "We do not play with guns at school," the message the players receive is that whoever is in charge decides what happens. After all, the teacher does not ban other play that children choose simply because of the theme. The children are not actually being unsafe. They know they are not actually playing with guns, but rather pretending to play with guns. This can be a big distinction for the children playing. They know they could not bring real lions to school, but they can play lion. They could not actually fill the school with hot lava, but they can pretend there is hot lava in the school. So why can they not pretend to use a gun? The most likely answer is because the teacher has declared that they cannot. Therefore, the message is, "The person in power decides what happens."

Looking into the future, this is a dangerous message for any child to grow up with. Some day these children may grow up to find themselves in power. Do they get to be the one who decides what happens to other people? If they are subordinate to someone, do they have to follow that person's wishes?

On the other hand, teachers allowing gunplay by turning a blind eye to the play send a different message that can be just as damaging. If a child pretends to shoot another child who is not playing, the teacher may miss the chance to teach a child to ask others to play. Of course, this can happen with other types of play. In the story above, Hektor tried to play doctor with Tou despite Tou's clear reluctance. The issue is not what is being played, rather it is the willingness of the children. The teacher can help Hektor realize he can ask if Tou wants to play, as well as help Tou realize that he can tell Hektor to stop. The same is true if Hektor chose to play guns. In order to do this, the teacher needs to be engaged with the children.

Without the teacher's guidance, the message children might receive in this situation is that they can do what they want without having to listen to others. Again, this has negative implications when children grow up and are on their own. Can they choose what happens to another person? Can someone else decide what happens to them?

The third possibility is that the teacher would allow gunplay but interact enough to guide children when they need help. The teacher could be a play partner or simply an observer. Either way, the teacher shows that they respect the children's choice for this type of play. In the opening scenario, the teacher, Sonia, allowed Juanita and Hektor to play. The two of them did not interrupt other children who were not playing. Later, Sonia could talk to them about how they seemed to enjoy playing with each other. She may even ask about the game. If they had bumped into someone else, or pretended to shoot someone who was not playing, Sonia could have addressed the issue without condemning the choice of gunplay.

The message for children is that the ideas are welcome, but they must still respect the wishes of others around them. We can teach children about consent whenever we help them to gain permission for interaction. But we must take our own viewpoint into account when we do this. Just because we may be uncomfortable with gunplay does not mean we should not allow it.

Children learn to respect others by having adults respect them. It may be harder for some of us to do this for children who enjoy violent play themes. But if we reflect on the impact of our words on these children and their sense of self-worth, perhaps we can reach children who too often do not feel accepted in the classroom.